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PRIMING THE PUMP AND CONTROLLING THE FLOW.

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THE BEGINNING WRITER NEEDS BOTH ENCOURAGEMENT AND DIRECTION. ONCE A STUDENT, NONVERBAL OR FLUENT, HAS EXPRESSED AN OPINION, SIGNIFICANT OR TRIVIAL, THE PUMP CAN BE PRIMED BY ASKING HIM "WHY," AND HIS FLOW OF "BECAUSES" CAN BE CONTROLLED BY CHANNELING THEM INTO A SIMPLE PATTERN. THE NONVERBAL STUDENT IS ENCOURAGED TO WRITE WHEN HE LEARNS THAT A SIMPLE OPINION CAN BE SPECIFICALLY SUPPORTED AND DEVELOPED INTO AN ACCEPTABLE THEME. THE BRILLIANT STUDENT MUST LEARN TO ASK HIMSELF "WHY" AND THEN TO CONTROL HIS "BECAUSES" TO KEEP HIS IDEAS FROM INUNDATING HIS THEME. THIS APPROACH TO THINKING AND WRITING WILL NOT ONLY AID STUDENTS IN WRITING, BUT WILL ALSO CARRY OVER INTO OTHER SUBJECTS AND THE EVALUATION OF PROPAGANDA. MOREOVER, THE "WHY" AND "BECAUSE" PATTERN ENABLES TEENAGERS TO REALIZE THAT VALID AND RELEVANT REASONS ARE IMPORTANT IF THEIR IDEAS ARE TO BE ACCEPTED BY THE THINKING PERSON. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 56 (JANUARY 1967), 109-113.) (MM)

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Priming the Pump and Controlling the Flow

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AFTER years of hearing my students wail, "If I could just get started and narrow my subject, maybe I could get a theme written," I have been consistently applying the Why-and-Because method to their problems. I begin by encouraging them to express an opinion about something that interests them and about something they know. Almost anything will do: their backgrounds, their experiences, their hobbies, their political beliefs, or their friends and enemies. There is probably no one group more opinionated than teenagers, for they have an opinion on almost anything that crosses their line of vision. They hate, despise, adore, worship, and swoon over people, causes, problems, and trends with an intensity that is almost frightening at times. Whether their cause is the Beatles, the draft-card burners, the demonstrators in a picket line, Hell's Angels, or the war in Viet Nam, they are not only ready but eager to express their opinions. Asking a teenager why he believes as he does not only surprises him but flatters him, too, for, as does everyone else, he likes to be noticed. When his opinions are respected, even though challenged, he realizes that someone really cares about what he thinks. Nor does the opinion have to be startlingly significant to be considered, for even a trivial opinion can be used as grist for the mind mill. I have found that in priming the pump with the question *why* and then controlling the flow of his *becauses* by channeling them into a simple pattern, some of his writing problems disappear.

Let's take, for example, the non-verbal student who rarely says much and usually writes even less. He will respond to *why*, however, as well as anyone else although probably not as quickly nor as profusely. Even though he will probably never overwhelm anyone with a rush of original and exciting ideas, he can be coaxed into saying *something*. Hopefully, there will not be many like this remedial student. In the beginning of the semester, he seemed perfectly satisfied to sit for an hour and stare, with no apparent discomfort, at one five-word sentence that he had finally written. When I chastised him the first time for wasting almost the whole period, he just looked at me and said, "I know I'm not writing anything, but I have a problem. I'm a stutterer." I told him I realized that, but I didn't see how that particular speech

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problem applied to his writing. In all seriousness, he replied, "Well, I stutter when I write, too." Inwardly, I was amused by this rationalization, but outwardly I conceded that he might have a point even though I wasn't quite sure that I saw it. So we sat and visited for awhile. Rather, I talked at first and he listened, for his speech problem had clearly impeded the flow of ideas or at least the expression of them. Finally, I found out that he had lived on a farm all his life and that this was his first semester away from home. To my question, "Do you like living on a farm?" he responded with a quick and emphatic, "No, Ma'm, I just hate it." And there was the thesis statement I had been probing for. Answering his *why* he hated it so much, he stuttered out his *becauses* which seemed valid enough to me to be used as his topic sentences. When I enthusiastically pointed out to him that he had just outlined his first theme, he looked at me suspiciously but hopefully. It was a simple procedure to draw up a very short outline, but he was as proud of his creation as Faulkner might have been with the Nobel Prize. Here is what we worked out together.

Thesis statement: I don't like living on a farm.
Body: 1. I don't like taking care of animals.
2. I don't like working by myself or with just my dad.
3. I don't like having to work all summer without a vacation.
Conclusion: All of these reasons make me very dissatisfied with farm life.

Just a simple question *why* had encouraged this boy to explain to me his reasons, that I called his *becauses*, but it started him to thinking of not only his reasons but examples to convince me. Before the end of the semester, he had arrived at the place where he could make simple outlines and connect 450 words together into an acceptable theme. Sometimes the ribs of the skeleton outline showed through because his somewhat limited ability to think deeply enough made the covering a bit thin. Nevertheless, he had learned to question himself, to answer the question with reasons and specific examples, and to write connected prose without stuttering.

ALL students need some form to drape their ideas upon, for the plodding non-verbal student will rarely complete a theme without a goal to work toward even though he might desperately desire to do so. The I-don't-want-to-write-a-theme student can often be encouraged by just showing him that his opinions can be dignified by calling them thesis statements and that his reasons for his opinions can be worthy of being labeled topic sentences. Even though the resulting theme may be wooden, unimaginative, and labored, lumbering along with mechanical transitions, it is better than what he would have otherwise produced.

THE VERBAL and creative student, too, can profit from the *why*-and-*because* approach, for his problem lies in his facility and fluency. His thoughts tumble around as clothes in a dryer, because he never takes time to sort them out. His themes are often a hodge-podge collection of incoherent sentences and irrelevant examples that distract from the central idea and defeat whatever purpose he might have begun with. He is the type who sits down and blithely dashes off 500 words on any assigned subject and hands it in, confidently expecting an A. He rarely has narrowed his focus to a clear, central idea and has no other purpose than to write the required number of words. He rarely gets around to summarizing his ideas, because they are too scattered to be related to each other. He rarely concludes his theme; he just

abandons it when the 500 words have been written. Because he can leap astride his ideas and ride off in all directions at once, he mistakenly thinks he is a fluent writer. The priming of the pump in his case is not as important as channeling the flood of ideas that rush heedlessly into expression.

So, let us consider the type of student who reads widely, discusses everything, thinks rapidly, if illogically, and willingly expresses his opinion on any subject. His ideas do not have to be dragged out of his fertile, though uncultivated, mind by intensive questioning, but he should learn to approach his subject with the same cautiousness as does the plodding thinker. If he is allowed to run rampant and express his too-often irresponsible ideas, he may grow to depend on his glittering generalities, his involved, fuzzily constructed sentences, and his high-flown language, thinking that all this will impress the reader.

I REMEMBER vividly, one student who loved to probe for and analyze the often obscure meanings some novelists hide beneath clever plots and brilliant dialogue. This student was a voracious reader who looked forward to the two book reviews required each semester on outside reading. He was particularly enamored with symbolism, and he found it in everything: the shape of wastepaper baskets, the designs on iced-up windshields, the patterns in dress materials, and the arrangement of desks and chairs in a classroom. He had a facile and ready response to everything, but he had escaped thus far without having been made responsible for his glibly aired but usually unsupported opinions. Because he was wildly enthusiastic about the symbolism he had discovered in *The Sun Also Rises*, I suggested that he explore his ideas and write a 1000-word paper on the symbolism he had found in the novel. Knowing, however, that he would bubble up and foam over with hundreds of ideas and make little or no effort to organize them, I insisted that he make a brief but purposeful outline before he began writing the paper. Getting his thesis statement was no problem, but the thought that he was obliged to exert on the outline was more taxing. Organizing his thoughts, although the most difficult part of the assignment, was also the most rewarding part for him. I was rewarded, too, for my unrelenting attitude, when I saw the following outline of what was probably the most impressive theme he had ever written:

Thesis statement:	Hemingway used Jake Barnes as a symbol to show why the Lost Generation was unable to adjust to the aftermath of the war.
Body:	1. Jake's inability, as well as his lack of desire, to reconcile himself to his war wound kept him from making an adjustment.
	2. Jake continued to seek comfort in the secular rituals that had once given him physical satisfaction, knowing that such gratification was impossible, and ignored the possibility that he might substitute spiritual satisfactions.
	3. Jake, blaming the injustices of war for his condition, resented the impotence he had been forced to accept and retaliated with apathetic and defensive behavior.
Conclusion:	Through the symbol of Jake Barnes, Hem-

> ingway demonstrated that the lack of ability to adapt to a changing social order was what had rendered the Lost Generation impotent.

Even with flaws in outline and reasoning, it is obvious that this student was capable of mature and logical analysis. He wrote a tight 1000-word theme that said a great deal more because he had focused the paper on a clear central idea instead of spewing forth 2,000 words of randomly selected ideas.

Naturally, the majority of students will fall into the in-between area, for such polar examples are the extreme rather than the usual. I selected these two examples to show that the same *why*-and-*because* approach can be used with both the brilliant and the unimaginative student. My honors students quickly grasp the idea, apply it, and skillfully disguise the bones of their skeleton outlines with mature sentences, subtle transitions, and coherent unified paragraphs full of discriminatory examples. Released from the problem of wondering what to say in the next paragraph, they can apply themselves to their rhetoric. The non-fluent student, whose ideas are pried from almost barren soil, is also set free by his before-writing organization so he can labor over his 15-word-or-fewer sentences without distraction. Each has provided himself with a road map that indicates major changes in direction and a specific destination toward which he can move without getting lost on unmarked detours. Both know where they are going and when they have arrived. Thus, the often despised, write-a-450-word-theme-for-Monday assignment becomes less onerous. Just knowing how to prime his own pump with *why* and channeling his *because*s into a pattern, the student becomes less resistant to theme assignments, for he feels some security in knowing how to tackle them.

THE GRADING of thousands of themes written by the quick and the slow has convinced me that the beginning writer needs encouragement and direction at the same time. He needs to be jogged into thinking, but, further, he needs to be made responsible for his thinking. He will become not only a better writer but he will become a better thinker, for by simply asking himself "*Why* do I say this?" and then marshaling his *because*s into an orderly arrangement he will develop more awareness of how he and others do think. The ability to evaluate, discriminate, and relate ideas helps in other courses and in writing essay examinations. Furthermore, it develops the ability to weigh and analyze propaganda by encouraging the student to probe for the reasons why something has been said or written. When he is keenly aware that opinions, in themselves, do not constitute evidence, he will not be taken in by hearsay and gossip. In addition, asking the *why* and finding the *because*s can be applied to the evaluation of advertising, newspaper reporting, and political speeches. Although I sometimes disconcert my students by challenging their reasoning, I feel sure that they come to realize that valid and relevant reasons are important if their ideas are to be accepted by the thinking person.

Now, glance back over this article and see how I used the *why*-and-*because* approach to organize my material. Here is my outline:

Thesis statement:	Priming the pump with *why* and channeling the flow of *because*s into an outline will benefit most students.
Body:	1. The non-verbal student is encouraged to write when he learns that a simple opinion can be specifically sup-

ported and made into an acceptable theme.

2. The brilliant student, too, needs to ask himself *why* and then control his *becauses* to keep his flowing ideas from inundating his theme.

3. Not only will this simplified approach to thinking and writing aid the students in writing, but it will carry over into other subjects and the evaluation of propaganda.

Conclusion: Therefore, the *why*-and-*because* approach to thinking and writing will help all students not only to write better but to think better and, as a result, will carry over into all phases of their lives when controlled objectivity is needed.

And there is the skeleton outline that I used to explore my opinions and the reasons I have submitted to support those opinions. And in doing myself what I tell my students to do, I trust that I, too, have been successful in convincing you that my opinions are worthwhile ones.